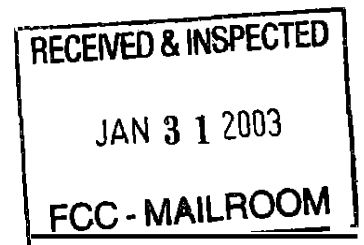


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EVERETT C. PARKER
11 MIDLAND AVENUE, WHITE PLAINS, NY 10606
914-946-0097.0524 Fax 914-946-7340



January 31, 2003

Hon. Michael Powell
Hon. Kathleen Abernathy
Hon. Jonathan Adelstein
Hon. Michael Copps
Hon. Kevin Martin
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Powell and Commissioners:

RE: Request for Initiation of Proceeding Into Character of WorldCom, Inc. and Other
Commission Licensees (RM - 10613)

I am writing to comment on a petition for rulemaking filed by the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, Inc. (UCC). I founded the UCC Office of Communication and was its Director for 30 years. During that time, UCC participated in a host of commission proceedings, which were focused on the issues at stake in RM - 10613; seeking to ensure that only citizens of good character may serve as trustees of the communications facilities that are essential to our commerce and our democratic way of life. (See the WLBT litigation, Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. FCC, 359 F. 2d 994 [D.C. Cir 1996] ["UCC I"], which gave standing to viewers, and Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. FCC, 425 F. 2d 543 [D.C. Cir. 1969] ["UCC II"], which held that segregationists lack the character to serve as broadcast licensees; and Petition for Rulemaking to Require Broadcast Licenses to Show Nondiscrimination in Their Employment Practices [Report and Order] 18 F.C.C. 2d 240 [1969].)

In the ensuing years, the media and telecommunications industries have steadily converged. With that convergence ought to come the convergence of the best aspects of media regulatory law with the best aspects of telecommunications regulatory law.

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That is why RM – 10613 is just as important as our efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to promote diversity and fair treatment of the public among broadcasters. The UCC today is asking this essential question: Should telecommunications companies, who control most of the pipelines through which all Americans obtain news and information and can interact with one another, have the same good character requirements the Commission wisely expects of traditional over-the-air broadcast companies?

The answer has to be “yes”. This is the right case for the Commission to take that stand. The WLBT litigation involved what seems now to be extreme conduct – a Southern television station’s segregated practices were then all too commonplace, all too impervious to change or challenge.

In its day, WLBT’s practices were as unsettling to its 43 percent of Black viewers as WorldCom’s practices of a different sort are to its customers today. As UCC has meticulously documented, WorldCom has displayed unprecedented corrupt behavior, such as serial misrepresentations and deceptions visited on government agencies, including, apparently, the FCC itself.

Why is this so profoundly important? Because the ultimate protection, and often the only protection, consumers really have in the unequal-status dealings with a powerful telecommunications company is that company’s good name. When a subscriber receives a telephone bill indicating that the company is FCC-regulated, he or she automatically assumes that the bill was honestly rendered and that all charges on the bill are genuine and fair.

I have read the pleadings and am troubled by the scope and mendacity of WorldCom’s misconduct. WorldCom’s actions are a modest subset of the range of misbehaviors by which a company can manifest its lack of character. For example, a company can recruit and hire without providing equal opportunity. It can deny fair compensation and benefits to its employees. It can issue consumers misleading billing statements and charge consumers hidden costs of which they have no notice or comprehension. It can cheat the Universal Service Fund. It can “redline” and cream-skim by serving wealthy and non-minority neighborhoods first, often at the expense of less wealthy and minority neighborhoods.

Consumers deserve to have at their disposal the enforcement tools and the regulatory tradition to combat such practices. Just as the development of the law of broadcast character made UCC I and UCC II possible in defense of racial justice, so, too, must the law of telecommunications character make it possible to bring public justice to the wired society.

Fortunately, the Commission has recognized that its broadcast character policy also applies in the telecommunications sphere. See MCI Telecommunications Corp., 3 FCC Rcd 509,512 ¶31 (1988) and other cases. Now the time has come to put flesh on these bones. **The** Commission should grant **RM** – 10613; should conduct a thorough and careful inquiry under Section 403 of the Communications Act; should release its findings, and then should act appropriately to protect the public interest.

It is a privilege to be able to add **my** convictions to those **of** others who speak for the public interest in telecommunications.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Everett B. Felt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

cc: Cregg Skall, Esq.